

## **MIGRANTS, BORDERS AND LABOUR REGIMES IN MAURITANIA: BETWEEN MILITARISATION AND MOBILITY**

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### **Introduction**

Migration into Mauritania from the south is composed of the following highly volatile and confluent channels: 1) pendular border crossings of the Senegal River from neighbouring regions in Senegal and Mali, which may be daily or itinerant for traders, and seasonal or longer-term for those seeking employment; these migrations also incorporate southern Mauritians moving northwards to urban areas; 2) labour migration from further afield in West Africa, linked historically to fishing and mineral-led growth; 3) intended migration to Europe from West and Central Africa, including people who head directly to the coast to depart for the Canary Islands, or “step-wise” migrants who will seek informal employment to fund the onward journey; 4) refugees.

This paper is concerned with reconciling the connections and contradictions between migration and borders, which represent opposing economic and territorial regimes and are often viewed separately.<sup>22</sup> It will first examine how and why people move from one place to another in this West African context, particularly focusing on labour migration. Secondly, it will show the how Mauritania’s boundaries attempt to regulate these flows at the local level. Confronting and reshaping channels of migration, there are an unprecedented number of checkpoints and frontiers, as well as institutional boundaries that enforce the “global life-chance divide” with efforts to contain people in Africa (Duffield, 2010; Traoré, 2007). Mauritanian territory plays a critical role in enforcing this divide along with the other Maghreb countries. This paper’s focus on migrants from households to the south of the Sahara does not, however, connote the treatment of Mauritania merely as a “void” territory, nor a strategically important desert territory, detached from the rest of Africa and from the discourse of development. On the contrary, its status as a transit country, formalised by the EU, will be compared with its own evolving migrant labour regimes. This paper is underpinned by ethnographic research among migrants who have returned from, passed through, or remained in Mauritania. A multi-scalar analysis highlights the broader, structural causes of mobility and restriction, drawing attention to key historical factors in these competing political economies.

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## The development of migrant labour into Mauritania

Migration is often viewed as the “mere displacement of a labour force”, with a surplus labour force on one hand, and no questions asked as to the reasons for this surplus, and then jobs that are available on the other hand, with no questions asked about the reasons for this availability (Sayad, 2004: 3). This section considers the nature of this displacement and argues that the principal driving force of West African migration into Mauritania and towards Europe is neither inequality of income, poverty nor the ‘opportunities’ expected in globalisation, or there would be higher numbers emigrating. Africa, particularly West Africa, has been included in accounts of a culturally globalised world, yet it is excluded from discussion of global capital flows (Ferguson, 2006: 30-4). These latter, however, are key to displacement, mobility and development. Migration continues to be strongly linked with ongoing capital accumulation, by which land, labour and natural resources are commodified. This accumulation leads to the “freeing” of labour by displacement, and because labour-power is a commodity, it is subjected by global capitalism to patterns of trade that resemble other commodities, thus economically concentrated and unequal (Cooper, 2008: 182). “Irregular” mobility is predominantly concentrated between sending households that are dispossessed of the means of subsistence, and areas of transit or recruitment such as the ports in Mauritania or the farms in Spain among other places of convergence in the Maghreb and Southern Europe. This binds the causes and consequences of migration with the process of working across borders.

The divergence in development trajectories between the previously equivalent Sahara-Sahel and European entities has been linked historically with the latter's development of the Atlantic slave trade (Amin, 1972: 511). Prior to the French delimitation of Mauritania's borders, Portuguese entry to the Ile d'Arguin placed the focus of European competition on the coast in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Further down the West African coast, the Atlantic trade strengthened the port towns of Abidjan, Bissau, Banjul, Dakar and Saint-Louis, weakening inland trade structures sometimes by force. Coastal states, previously peripheral, embedded themselves in merchant capitalism and preserved their power with military assistance (Findley, *et al*, 1995: 471; *L'Humanité*, 2008). It is argued, however, that historiography has been shaped by the colonial reality, thus directing knowledge, as well as merchant capitalism, to the coast and to sub-Saharan regions. In contrast to accounts of the successful and damaging realignment of trade, “there was a thriving desert-side commerce in which gold, grain and slaves from the Sahel were traded for salt from the desert and the interregional networks buttressing this economy (...) were so strongly entrenched that the Europeans could not successfully penetrate” (McDougall, 2007: 19). This has contemporary relevance to our examination of migrations, which are heavily managed by Europe and the US whilst particular routes run alongside these interventions. A brief historical account of West African migration patterns will show how sub-Saharan migrants continuously circulate in Mauritania's political economy as labourers and, more recently, also enter the country as an intended stepping-stone to Europe.

### *The making of migrant labour patterns into Mauritania and Europe*

The Atlantic slave trade was followed by a strategy to keep labourers at home for the development of a colonial economy that in West Africa would constitute “the exchange of agricultural products against imported manufactured goods” (Amin, 1972: 511). Migrant labour, more than an epiphenomenon, was “manipulated” as a separate but related process to the restructuring of the economy (Riddell, 1981: 372-3). The coercion lay in the underdevelopment of communities, where production was hampered by trade monopolies and subsistence had to be paid for with wages, leading dispossessed producers to enter the labour reserve. It is widely accepted that colonial labour lacked freedom of circulation. There were, however, different forms of colonial labour, some of them “free”, reflecting the complexity of interactions between workers, local authorities and government regimes. In Senegal, early patterns of “step-wise” migration provided the choice of a few destinations and opportunities for social mobility (Conway, 1980), but this mobility was necessitated by a stringent taxation policy. To escape forced labour, some workers were driven to Mauritania and the Gambia, including a large-scale desertion by Senegalese Fulani (Fall and Mbodj, 1989: 266).

Before colonial conquest, Mauritania was organised into emirates. It was most densely populated in the sub-Saharan region to the south of the Senegal River, where Tukolor and Fulani (both Halpulaar'en), Soninké and Wolof groups constituted sedentary village communities. They would pay tribute to chieftains representing the emirs. The Saharan tribes, speaking Hassaniya Arabic, were hierarchically divided into *bidan* tribes of Arab and Berber descent, black *haratin* (freedmen) and domestic slaves. Administrators would install “native henchmen” at the apex of this hierarchy and accountability shifted from local councils to distant administrators, exacerbating divisions in the traditional order (Bennoune, 1978; Seddon, 2000; Bonté, 1981). As a protectorate in French West Africa from 1903, Mauritania had its capital in Saint-Louis, Senegal. Sub-Saharans living here had to pay a head tax on every person over the age of ten and joined the reserve of labour for groundnut plantations. Saharan groups had to contribute a proportion of their herds and crops to the colonial administration. The imposition of colonial taxes and the opening of the market to French manufactured products launched the population into the international order (Bennoune, 1978: 35-8; Seddon, 2000: 209).

The Saharan population primarily engaged in agriculture and herding, up to the time of independence, while wage labour was of secondary importance. Substantial mining activity, which began after independence, changed this. A railway from Zouérat to Nouadhibou was constructed to support a two kilometre-long train, which would carry iron ore to the coast for shipment to Europe and the United States. The combination of drought and heavy state taxes produced a labour reserve for the mines (Bonté, 1975: 105; Bennoune, 1978: 46). As well as incorporating black citizens from the south in production, Mauritania also attracted cross-border migrants. Senegalese, Malian, Guinean and Beninese labourers were employed at the time of independence in 1960. By 1970, the population in Nouadhibou was composed of 11,500 Mauritians, 3,000 sub-Saharan Africans, 1,800 French and 1,000 Spanish immigrants, mainly

from the Canary Islands (Choplin, 2008: 75). Senegalese migrants entered the fishing zone, followed by Ghanaians from 1980 onwards. The Ghanaians began to salt and dry fish for export to the Gulf of Guinea.

In the “glorious years” between the mid-1940s and the mid-1970s, northern Europe drew on its “labour reservoir” north and south of the Mediterranean to complete its postwar reconstruction (Amin and El-Kenz, 2005: 107). After recruitment in the French army during World War II, Soninké labourers, in a region that straddles Mauritania, Mali and Senegal, could subsequently visit France and work, chiefly in automobile factories, before returning home (Dussauze-Ingrand, 1974: 243).

The contemporary era of migration can be linked with economic collapse and subsequent structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s. As former labour regimes diminished, migrant workers were increasingly distanced from employers. They would enter a greater range of countries in “step-wise” patterns while Europe closed down its borders. This era was also punctuated by expulsions in West Africa. In 1982, Ghana closed its borders with Togo, and Sierra Leone expelled Fula community members. In 1983, Nigeria expelled roughly two million people and there were further expulsions from Liberia and Ghana. Conflict between Liberia and Sierra Leone in 1990 produced half a million refugees (Mafukidze, 2006; Arthur, 1991). In Mauritania, the traditional system of land management was abolished under structural adjustment programmes. Land was distributed according to clientelistic relations. Peri-urban settlements accelerated and financial speculation governed land transfer. A clandestine market grew and prices reached more than ten times the official amount. Land reform also affected the Halpulaar, Wolof and Soninké groups along the Senegal River. Abolishment of the system of collective land ownership led to dispossession by ruling factions. The land was passed over to haratin for cultivation (Crousse and Hesselting, 1994: 89-90). The resulting disputes precipitated conflict between Mauritania and Senegal, and within Mauritania between the bidan and black citizens, including the haratin. From April to May 1989 and in the months that followed, villages in the Trarza-Est region were cleared out by the Mauritanian army. Residents, mainly Halpulaar and Wolof, were expelled to Senegal and Mali. In February 1989, almost half of the fishermen in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott were Senegalese. By August, Senegalese migrants did not appear in the registers and were replaced by Mauritians, Nigerians and Ghanaians (Choplin, 2008: 76). By 1991, five hundred black officers in the armed forces were executed in response to a fake coup and hundreds of civilians were killed. Senegal also expelled Mauritians, mainly traders, as a result of the same conflict (Jourde, 2007: 80; Charmes, 1994: 77).

In this era, new labour reserves developed in addition to the established ones, reflecting the dual characteristic of labour, as producers needed to sell their labour power as a result of the collapse of commodities and political crisis. The “commodity” of labour-power from underdeveloped communities also faced political and economic change. The system of migrant labour has reproduced because new territory continues to be opened up in the “global” era. In Senegalese coastal communities, for example, new forms of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2003) have led to new migrations. These processes have

included the development of international fishing agreements, the suppression of local forms of production and consumption and neo-colonial appropriation of assets. They have led young fishermen to sell their boats and abandon their activities.<sup>23</sup> A repatriated migrant explained: "I'll no longer fish (...) Because of fishing agreements that Senegal has signed with other countries, it has become very difficult, not to mention the high price of oil" (Interview, Thiaroye-sur-Mer, 3 June 2008). Also reflective of accumulation, the mother of an emigrant in Spain explained that his father sold an inherited plot of land to fund the journey. Presently, her son's remittances were supporting his brother's family, who would not otherwise eat breakfast (Interview, Thiaroye-sur-Mer, 6 June 2008).

This reveals a dependence on remittances to meet basic household needs, resulting from the loss of land and livelihoods. However, legal and safe options for African migration fail the youth who need them. For the 31,000 migrants who reached the Canary Islands from the West African coasts in 2006, their entry to Spain usually represents *unfree* labour mobility, which has a great human and economic cost. It is linked with political and legal constraints that proscribe free circulation in the labour market, for example by indentured labour or the prevention of entry into particular sectors (Miles, 1987). Spain's growth before the 2008 financial crisis was the result of "increased labour utilisation and capital accumulation" (OECD, 2009: 104). Its comparative advantage in labour costs signifies large, growing pressure to pay the labour force at a lower rate than the cost of reproduction and subsistence (Bush, 2007: 57). Migrants become adversely incorporated because they are excluded from receiving "indirect wages" in the form of family allowance, pensions, unemployment benefits and sickness cover. This means that sending communities cover these costs. Furthermore, foreign workers can be reproduced, nourished, housed, trained and habituated without extra cost to the state (Cohen, 1987; Meillassoux, 1975: 120-2).

The structural conditions of dispossession that have been sketched in this section do not, however, predict migrants' trajectories. This is evident in the diverse histories of migrant workers in Mauritania, which reveal a range of previously visited countries, including those in West Africa, as well as Libya, Morocco and Algeria in unsuccessful attempts to go to Europe. Furthermore, intentions are unpredictable, with religion, border experiences and opportunity in Mauritania influencing migrants' decisions. Mauritania's role in the migration regime is contradictorily to help determine that migrants towards Europe are unfree, whilst also revealing a Saharan economy that provides a lifeline to famished and dispossessed men and women and their households, often with freer movement and higher returns than Europe can offer. It became the first African country to adopt a national refugee law, following three years of capacity-building with UNHCR (UNHCR, 2004).

In Nouakchott, the Cinquième District is populated by migrants from Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Gambia and Mali (labour-sending countries); and refugees from Mali, Sierra Leone and

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<sup>23</sup> This is examined in more depth in H. Cross (forthcoming, 2013), "Labour and Underdevelopment? Migration, dispossession and accumulation in West Africa and Europe", *Review of African Political Economy*.

Liberia, amongst other nationalities. As provisions for refugees in Mauritania are limited, refugees ultimately become labour migrants. Women from Gambia, Senegal, Mali and southern Mauritanian villages gather outside the church in the Tevragh-Zeina district of Nouakchott and seek recruitment as domestic workers. They explain that it is easier to find work and the wages are better than where they live. A Gambian migrant was sending home 20,000 UM (€54.70) every three months via her ambassador, and planned to start a clothing business (Interview, Nouakchott, 7 May 2007). A migrant from Podor, a Senegalese town along the Senegal River that has experienced severe environmental degradation, explained: "We go and come back (...) when we have the money we want, we go back". In Senegal, "it's not difficult to find work but the wages are very low compared to here in Mauritania" (Interview, Nouakchott, 7 May 2007). It is part of a process that is also known as "straddling", by which different family members move back and forth between local agriculture, urban wage labour and overseas jobs, contributing to village social resources. This does not reflect "an outdated culture that values collectivity over individual achievement, but rather strategies to preserve social ties vital to communities whose historical experiences include the slave trade, colonial depressions and the ups and downs of government programmes and export markets" (Cooper, 2008: 188).

Furthermore, the port in Nouadhibou continues to offer work to migrants, where there is high demand in the fishing and mechanical sectors (Ministère de l'Emploi, de l'Insertion et de la Formation Professionnelle, 2008). A Ghanaian migrant explained that it was easy to save because the cost of living was lower (Interview, Nouakchott, 20 May 2008). These informal possibilities are connected with displacement and migrants' lack citizenship rights, but their modes of migrating and remitting reflect the superficial nature of capitalist transformation, particularly in this supposed "vacuum territory" within which Europe would separate the two continents by military means (Baldwin-Edwards, 2005; Bennoune, 1978: 36).

### **A frontier country?**

Whether or not Mauritania is "naturally" a transit country has been challenged. It is argued that its "Saharo-Sahelian identity is no ideological fiction", but it has historical roots in a double Maghrebi and West African identity (Ahmed-Salem, 2005: 492; 2010). An additional argument is that the "Saharan frontier" that separates Arabs and Berbers from black Africans is "artificial" as cross-cultural interactions transcend this boundary (Lydon, 2005: 293). These statements are not contradictory but signify a constructed divide between strongly interlinked regions. We will see in the contemporary outcomes of the border regime that there are contrasting realities: one of continued exchange of goods and labour between the Sahara and regions to the south and another of progressively hardened border controls. The border crossing between Senegal and Mauritania must be one of Africa's most strikingly "natural" boundaries as the environment rapidly changes to desert landscape and livelihoods. This should not, however, be confused with the ideological boundaries that separate Mauritania, a West African country itself, from

“Africa”. It is usual for large countries, let alone continents, to encompass dramatic geological and climatic differences, so this does not account for the separation. It is instead a continuous process in representations of knowledge that disengage the Sahara from the historical development of Africa (McDougall, 2007: 23).

In addition to the EU's efforts to limit migration, the US also includes border security and the control of human mobility in its regional strategy. Particularly in 2005, after West and Central Africans were confronted with bullets in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco, Mauritania became the stepping-stone for step-wise migrants. Pirogues carried roughly 20,000 clandestine emigrants from Nouadhibou in 2006, with human losses ranging from 20 percent up to 40 percent in February and March (Choplin, 2008: 85). Mauritania therefore linked with the “buffer zone” that includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya (Baldwin-Edwards, 2005: 4). It joined the arrangement that is now known as the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean in 2007, partnering Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and more recently, Balkan states with the EU.

Mauritania's incorporation in European border management sets it apart from its sub-Saharan neighbours, which are engaged, but with a smaller role for the military, in the policy of restricting “unwanted” migration. In Mauritania's post-independence trajectory, foreign rents have defined the state and its borders. Characteristic of a rentier state, the receipt of substantial revenues from iron ore and fisheries is combined with economic stagnation and political authoritarianism (Bush, 2007: 133). With neoliberal reform guided by the IMF and the World Bank, the *ouguiya* currency was devalued by over 500 percent per US dollar between 1980 and 2002. Food prices more than doubled in this period without proportionate salary and wage rises and unemployment reached almost half of the population (Ould-Mey, 2006: 349-351; Charmes, 1994: 76). Oil-based speculation stimulated a surge in growth in 2006, but indebtedness also increased with the import of exploration equipment for remote and diffuse deposits (EIU, 2009: 6). However, lessons from the past reveal that these hard statistics obscure the everyday exchanges and social relationships that have endured waves of accumulation.

The state is distant from society, which has been under military governance for much of its post-independence history. The War on Terror has usurped the political development that was hoped for after the country's first democratic election in 2007. In Mauritania's ongoing but modest participation in the Arab Spring, protesters have demanded the retreat of the military from politics and to address the appalling hikes in food prices (Ekine, 2011; Ahmed-Salem and Samuel, 2011; Bush, 2010). In addition to iron and oil rents, migration rents have provided military aid and, in a converging fund, “terrorism rents” (Keenan, 2009: 206). The latter is not a new phenomenon. The use of anti-terrorist discourse enabled President Ould Sidi-Ahmed Taya's neo-authoritarian regime to gain external Western support in the early 1990s and to crack down on opponents (Jourde, 2007: 87).

The upshot of the War on Terror in Mauritania was that poverty, weak governments and unmonitored borders were declared as dangerous, and control of African territory, “both urban and rural, and its land, sea and aerial borders” would make African countries and American targets safe (Cilliers, 2003: 102). The US strategy of establishing bases to be maintained by local troops, combined with an offshore naval armada, has been compared to military operations in the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea region, when they were declared as national security interests (Klare and Volman, 2006: 302). There has also been comparison with the Cold War on the basis of US support to authoritarian dictatorships and the broadening of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) into a quasi-security agency (Hills, 2006: 632).

This undermines the EU’s “Global Approach to Migration and Mobility”, which aims to manage immigration by “holistic” and “integrated” means. Yet its Member States’ relationship with the US is one of cooperation. The US Navy and sea patrols have cooperated on the West African coast, with the stated aims of combating terrorism, illegal migration to the Canary Islands and drug trafficking, as well as securing oil interests from the Gulf of Guinea (Flynn, 2007). Furthermore, French nationals were ordered to rapidly exit an “exclusion zone” in May 2011, in a vast area to the east of Choum, Chinguetti, Tidjikdja, Ayoun el-Atrous and Bou Steile (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et Européennes, 2011). This was attributed to terrorism and it was claimed that the army was ordered to open fire on “suspect vehicles” in this territory that borders Western Sahara, Algeria and Mali.

The significance of this buffer zone for migrants is that the management of their mobility lacks the normative framework of EU partnerships that are practised in Senegal or Mali, as unbalanced as these partnerships are (Cross, 2011). Aminata Traoré (2007), former Malian Minister for Culture and Tourism, has argued that Africa is becoming a prison in which violence is subcontracted to countries of origin and transit. Mauritania’s partial integration into “Fortress Europe” gives it a double role of receiving “returned” migrants and also expelling sub-Saharan Africans who may attempt to go to Europe. The European Council definition of return is “the process of going back to one’s country of origin, transit or another third country” (Cassarino, 2006: 2). In other words, European states can “return” migrants of any African nationality to Mauritania, and also Mauritania can “return” sub-Saharans just outside its borders. Spanish authorities and the Mauritanian government installed a detention centre in Nouadhibou for migrants who attempted to leave Mauritania’s shores, which came to be known as “Guantánamito”, in 2006. A fisherman explained: “I know people who have left this beach but now it’s forbidden and if someone is caught, they are imprisoned” (Interview, Nouakchott, 7 May 2007). Furthermore, Mauritania signed an agreement with Spain in July 2003 that concerned not only readmission of its nationals but also of those who were presumed to have transited in the country. As boats leaving the West African coast pass Mauritania en route to the Canary Islands, the agreement reinforces the constructed divide with “Africa” as it becomes a European frontier. It takes roughly four days to reach Nouadhibou by pirogue from the Cap Vert peninsula in Senegal and it is common for boats to break down or run out of supplies.



In Mauritania's role as a returner of migrants, foreign workers can be arrested or directed to the southern border on suspicion of irregularity (Samy, 2008; Yessa, 2008: 1). In 2003, fifty migrants were sent back to the border, rising to 11,637 in 2006 (Mohamed-Saleh, 2008: 2). The International Organisation for Migration, the Mauritanian Ministry of the Interior, Post and Telecommunications and the French International Service of Technical Police Cooperation (SCTIP) arranged visits for Mauritanian officials to French posts in Modan, Lille, Strasbourg and Perpignan (Confidential document, anonymous international organisation). Border posts were established in 2010 at the frontiers with Senegal, Mali and Western Sahara. Since the fieldwork period, Mauritania has launched an initiative to enrol Mauritanian citizens and foreign residents in a national electronic database, using biometric technology which is meant to identify people at ports of entry. A new government agency has been established, the National Agency of the Population Register and Secure Documents, and this has verified the identity of over 100,000 individuals. The EU and the Spanish Guardia Civil joined in a ceremony to mark a US\$ 2.6 million investment in Project Western Sahel, which introduces new technology for border screening and training for border guards (US Dept. of State, 2011). At the same time, a border economy between Senegal and Mauritania continues, in which currencies are easily interchangeable, taxi drivers ferry cash and goods from migrant workers to their families and traders benefit from the different political economies. These "border rents" are gained as a result of arbitrary state divides (Gregoire and Labazée, 1993: 10). However, it is not an entirely parallel political economy because migrations are highly volatile and intersect in unexpected moments.

## **Conclusion**

They cannot stop people. They will try to control it but they cannot stop it; it's impossible. Before, there was nobody in Mauritania taking that risk; they'd go from Morocco. But when they blocked Morocco, people started in Mauritania, and if they block Mauritania, people will start from Libya, and when they block Libya, people will travel to Tunis, and when they block Tunis, people will start from Algeria. (Interview, Nouadhibou, 17 May 2008)

The historical background to labour mobility in this paper has raised the importance of explaining how and why migrants continue to confront increasingly dangerous border regimes. It has examined separately the opposing agendas of mobility and militarisation that circumscribe migration into and out of Mauritania. It raises questions about which trajectories present a challenge to West Africa's established role in global capitalism, and which ones entrench its underdevelopment. Local contexts enrich this enquiry because they show that the global labour market in its institutional form does not predict local outcomes.

The securitisation agenda we have seen in Mauritania challenges democracy and the aims of normative and institutional development. This is in the dual sense that it provides rent to a state that is autonomous from society and that this rent is also directed at repressive apparatuses that target particular

groups and reinforce the military style of leadership. Sub-Saharan migrants not only enter a key frontier in imperial struggle but are also integrated into its strategy. The paradox of this paper is that the highly securitised territory in which Europe has externalised its border restrictions is also one that sometimes offers migrants the most “freedom” – by means of circulation in the labour market and retention of existing social structures. A historical examination of the Mauritanian state helps to unravel this mystery. Its populations have developed in divergence from the state’s boundaries, its political economy, and external constructions of the Sahara. This analysis illustrates the importance of reimagining the autonomy of migrants beyond the successful crossing of borders. This is a complex question that needs further enquiry into ever-changing dynamics in their historical context.

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